

*S*chool Councils - Next Steps

Minister's Forums on School Councils
Final Report

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August 9, 1999

Honourable Lyle Oberg
Minister of Learning
227 Legislature Building
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Dear Minister:

I am pleased to submit the report of the Minister's Forums on School Councils M.L.A. Working Group.

The fact that thousands of people chose to become involved in the review of the effectiveness of school councils shows just how important they have become to Albertans. Therefore, it is without hesitation that we can say school councils are achieving their mandate to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta. It is encouraging to note that the vast majority of school councils say they are operating efficiently and effectively. As a result the recommendations contained in this report are designed to help councils take the next steps in their development.

The members of the M.L.A. Working Group would like to thank all those who aided us in our endeavors and to recognize some individuals in particular: Ann Davidson and her colleagues in Community Development who were instrumental in making the public forums a success. Dick Baker of Nichols Consulting who helped capture data from the workbooks and then presented an analysis of the results at the public forums. Beryl Cullum of Alberta Learning for her valuable communications assistance. Terence Harding of Harwick Consultants who helped us develop the workbook and craft this report. And Ron Smith of Alberta Learning who deftly guided us through the entire process.

Thank you for the opportunity to conduct this review. Our experience has shown us that school councils play an important role in the education of Alberta's children and that the commitment of school council members and educational stakeholders will ensure their ongoing success.

Yours truly,

Rob Renner (Chair)
M.L.A. Medicine Hat

Denis Ducharme
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The Role of School Councils

School councils were created in 1995 and established under Section 17 of the *School Act*. Councils are mandatory for all public schools including charter schools.

School councils must be comprised of the principal, at least one teacher, parents of students who are enrolled in the school, and a community representative who is not a parent of a child in the school. Parents must form the majority of school council members. High school councils must have at least one student member.

School councils have a mandate to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta. Through school councils, Albertans assume an advisory role in local educational matters ranging from academic programs to school policies and budgeting.

The Need for a Review

When school councils were made mandatory, it was intended that their effectiveness in providing Albertans with meaningful involvement in education be reviewed after three years.

Formation of the M.L.A. Working Group

In October of 1998, then Minister of Education, the Honourable Gary Mar, formed the M.L.A. Working Group.

The Working Group was asked to examine how well school councils were fulfilling their mandate and report back to the minister with its findings and recommendations.

M.L.A. Working Group Composition

The M.L.A. Working Group was made up of:

- Rob Renner, M.L.A. for Medicine Hat (Chair)
- Denis Ducharme, M.L.A. for Bonnyville-Cold Lake
- Karen Kryczka, M.L.A. for Calgary West.

Development of a Workbook

The M.L.A. Working Group developed a workbook which was distributed to all:

- schools and school councils
- principals
- school boards
- provincial education organizations.

Copies of the workbook were also made available to members of the general public.

Purpose of the Workbook

The workbook was designed to enable the M.L.A. Working Group to determine the effectiveness of school councils from the point of view of:

- school councils
- individual school council members
- school boards
- provincial educational organizations
- the general public.

By completing the workbook, school councils and school council members would have the opportunity discuss the effectiveness of their individual school councils. Of particular interest to the M.L.A. Working Group were areas in which school councils had met or exceeded their expectations and where areas of concern existed.

Workbook Analysis

Completed workbooks were returned to Alberta Learning and then turned over to an independent third party for data capture and analysis.

Public Forums

A series of public forums were held around the province.

Findings from the workbook were presented at the forums and participants were asked to comment on them. In addition, the participants were asked to work in small groups to discuss the issues which had surfaced and to suggest approaches to resolving them. They were also asked to share with forum participants the many exemplary practices used by their school councils to be more effective.

Stakeholder Group Meetings

In addition to conducting public meetings, the M.L.A. Working Group met with and heard representations from education stakeholder groups:

- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Alberta School Boards Association
- Alberta Home and School Councils' Association
- Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association.

Findings of the M.L.A. Working Group

In general, the M.L.A. Working Group found that all stakeholders wanted school councils to continue to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta. The Working Group also found that most school councils were functioning well.

Through the discussions and presentations at the public forums, the M.L.A. Working Group determined that some school councils are more effective than others. It also became apparent a number of issues are preventing school councils from achieving their full potential. The M.L.A. Working Group's recommendations to the Minister of Learning contained in this report are intended to help address those issues.

M.L.A. Working Group Recommendations

The following is a summary of the Working Group's recommendations to the Minister of Learning:

1. That school councils remain mandatory under the *School Act*.
2. That school councils remain advisory bodies under the *School Act*.
 - 2.1 That Alberta Learning take action to ensure school councils are made fully aware their advisory role can include, but is not limited to, providing advice to the principal and/or school board on:
 - student achievement
 - budgeting
 - facility use
 - programs
 - policies.
 - 2.2 That Alberta Learning ensure comprehensive information materials related to the mandate and activities of school councils are readily available to:
 - school council members
 - principals
 - teachers
 - school boards.
 - 2.3 That Alberta Learning, in partnership with school boards as well as other stakeholders, ensure there is sufficient opportunity for school council members to receive training.

School council member training should include, but not be limited to:

- understanding the roles and responsibilities of school council members
- setting goals for the school council
- developing and monitoring a business plan for the school council
- developing school council bylaws
- improving communication skills.

3. That school boards facilitate processes for ensuring school councils have meaningful input in areas in which they choose to be involved.
4. That school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts.
5. That school councils develop three-year plans in relation to the three-year plans for their schools and boards and that school councils review and update their plans annually.
6. That community representatives remain a mandatory membership requirement for school councils and the School Council Regulation be changed to exclude ECS (Early Childhood Services) parents from qualifying as community representatives.
 - 6.1 That school boards and school councils share the responsibility for finding an appropriate community representative.
7. That Alberta Learning develop a core list of knowledge, skills and attributes principals require to work effectively with school councils and ensure appropriate learning materials and/or training programs are readily available.
 - 7.1 That superintendents ensure principals have the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to assist school councils in carrying out their role.
 - 7.2 That a portion of principals' performance assessments be based on their activities and participation in school councils.
8. That Alberta Learning develop a clear definition of what constitutes core education.
 - 8.1 That the use of school fundraising monies for core education be prohibited.
9. That the School Council Regulation be changed to make principals and teachers ex-officio (non-voting) members of school councils.
10. That the minister review the role and effectiveness of school councils in five years and that Alberta Learning continue to review the effectiveness of councils on an ongoing basis.

The Need for a Workbook

The Working Group believed that conducting public forums would be the best method for determining the effectiveness of school councils.

In order to maximize their productivity, participants would have to come to the public forums adequately prepared to discuss the issues of importance and concern to them. In addition, the M.L.A. Working Group realized it would need to determine if the issues and concerns presented at the public forums reflected those of a broad spectrum of school councils as well as their individual members. As a result, the Working Group decided to develop a workbook which would be sent to all:

- schools
- school councils
- school boards
- provincial education organizations
- M.L.A.'s.

Because of the importance of education to all Albertans, it was decided copies of the workbook also would be made available to members of the general public who were not members of school councils. The public was able to request a copy of the workbook from their local MLA or school. It was also available from Alberta Learning and accessible on the Internet.

Structure of the Workbook

The workbook was divided into sections for different audiences:

- school councils as a whole
- individual council members
- school boards
- interested members of the public.

Sections for school councils were to be completed by councils as a group, preferably during a meeting of the school council.

Sections for school council members were to be completed by the individual members of school councils.

Sections for school boards were to be completed by trustees as well as school board administrators and/or personnel who had interactions with school councils.

Sections for interested individuals were to be completed by parents and teachers who did not belong to a school council, as well as members of the public who were interested in helping school councils achieve their mandate.

Workbook Design

The workbook was designed to aid target audiences in evaluating the effectiveness of their school councils and identifying areas of strength and weakness.

Alberta Learning had been monitoring school council compliance with the School Council Regulation. The areas Alberta Learning had been examining were used as the basis for some questions in the workbook. The M.L.A. Working Group added questions pertaining to the effectiveness of school councils, their understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and the quality of the interaction between school councils and their school boards.

To aid in gathering data, many of the questions in the workbook asked respondents to select from a numerical range of answers. An example of that type of question is shown below.

<p>How often is your school council involved in providing advice about student achievement?</p> <p>Never Sometimes Often</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>How often should your school council be involved in providing advice about student achievement?</p> <p>Never Sometimes Often</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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For questions where this approach was not appropriate, space was provided for respondents to explain their answers and/or to provide information they thought would be valuable to the M.L.A. Working Group.

School councils also were asked to identify the practices they believed enabled them to be highly effective.

The workbook informed respondents that public forums on school councils would be held at various locations throughout the province. The stated purpose for these meetings was to:

- provide attendees with an opportunity to discuss and react to a summary of the workbook responses
- enable school councils to share their success stories and to discuss their common areas of concern
- assist attendees in formulating recommendations for the M.L.A. Working Group and determining who should be responsible for implementing them.

Respondents were invited to attend a forum and informed of the opportunity to make a presentation if they so wished.

Use of Workbook Findings

Alberta Learning received 2,020 completed workbooks which were turned over to Nichols Education Consulting Group for coding, data capture, and analysis.

The members of the Working Group realized the workbooks would not provide them with statistically valid data. However, they believed the workbook responses would enable them to develop a general idea of the attitudes, concerns, and issues of school councils and their members.

The Working Group also believed data from the workbooks could be used to help focus discussion at the public meetings. During these discussions, the participants would be able to determine if their concerns were unique to them or were shared by a broad cross section of school councils and their members.

Differences of Opinion

School council member responses were divided into two groups:

- principals and teachers
- other members which included parents, community representatives and students.

When these results were cross-tabulated, they suggested a number of differences of opinion.

Parents and community representatives appeared to want more involvement than desired by principals and teachers in areas such as:

- budgeting decisions
- facilities use
- student achievement
- student discipline
- staffing priorities & recruitment decisions
- programs offered.

Parents and community representatives appeared to view some areas as more of a challenge than principals and teachers did:

- understanding roles and responsibilities
- increasing effectiveness
- maximizing parental involvement
- creating and maintaining continuity of membership.

Principal and teacher members of school councils appeared to have less concern about fundraising than other members did.

Responses from school boards were broken out and compared with responses from councils. When the responses were cross-tabulated, they suggested a difference of opinion between the two groups. School boards indicated school councils had a higher degree of involvement in education than councils themselves generally thought they did. School boards reported significantly more feedback to school councils in areas such as board budgeting and programs offered in the school than councils reported.

These findings were of particular interest to the M.L.A. Working Group because they appeared to indicate differences in opinion as to what school councils should be doing and how they should go about doing it. As a result, these findings were used as part of the opening presentation at the public forums. The intent was to determine if the participants had concerns in those areas and, if they did, to encourage them to develop approaches which would help resolve them.

Best Practices

In the workbooks, school councils were asked to identify practices which they believed had helped them be effective. These practices have been compiled into a separate document which will be distributed to:

- school councils
- schools
- school boards
- provincial education organizations
- attendees at the public forums.

Forum Locations

Day-long public forums were held in:

- Bonnyville
- Calgary
- Edmonton
- Grande Prairie
- Medicine Hat
- Red Deer

An informal meeting also was held in Fort McMurray.

Forum Objectives

The purpose of the forums were to:

- provide attendees with an opportunity to discuss and react to a summary of the workbook responses
- enable school councils to share their success stories and to discuss common areas of concern
- assist attendees in formulating recommendations for the M.L.A. Working Group and determining who should be responsible for implementing them
- enable the Working Group to gather information which would form the basis of its report to the minister.

Forum Structure

Attendees were provided with a summary of responses of school councils as a whole, as well as an overview of the “best practices” which were submitted.

During the morning, attendees were divided into small groups and asked to discuss:

- the findings from the workbook
- the strengths of school councils
- the challenges school councils face
- the role school councils should be playing.

During the afternoon, participants were again divided into small groups and asked to discuss what could be done to maximize the contributions school councils make to the education of children in Alberta.

In addition to developing strategies to increase the effectiveness of school councils, participants were asked to indicate who they thought should be responsible for implementing those strategies.

Forum Results

The information provided from the small group discussions was incorporated into the recommendations contained in this report.

More than 90% of the participants indicated the forums were of value to them. The consistent positives which emerged included:

- the opportunity for information sharing among school councils
- the discussion of challenges facing school councils
- the discussion of school council roles and responsibilities
- the presentation of “best practices” by school councils.

1. That school councils remain mandatory under the *School Act*.

All stakeholders indicated school councils have an important role to play in the education of children in Alberta. Attendees at public forums generally indicated that school councils were a key venue for involving parents in the education of their children.

The workbooks received by the Working Group appeared to indicate a positive evaluation of the effectiveness of school councils with 87% of responses falling within the Always Effective and Usually Effective range. The trend suggested by workbook responses was reflected in the comments of attendees at the public forums and in presentations made to the Working Group.

2. That school councils remain advisory bodies under the *School Act*.

The workbook responses and the comments at the public forums for the most part indicated that council members were satisfied with playing an advisory rather than a decision-making role.

2.1 That Alberta Learning take action to ensure school councils are made fully aware their advisory role can include, but is not limited to, providing advice to the principal and/or school board on:

- student achievement
- budgeting
- facility use
- programs
- policies.

Workbook responses appeared to indicate the majority of respondents wanted greater involvement in the areas listed above. However, during the course of the public forums, it became apparent many members of school councils were unaware of all the areas in which they could be involved if they so chose. This finding was supported by workbook responses which appeared to indicate that only 44% of respondents believed they fully understood their roles and responsibilities.

As part of this recommendation, it is suggested that each school council be provided with a sample set of bylaws which illustrate the full range of school council activities.

2.2 That Alberta Learning ensure comprehensive information materials related to the mandate and activities of school councils are readily available to:

- school council members
- principals
- teachers
- school boards.

At the public forums, it became apparent many school council members were unaware of the information materials which were available to them. This finding was in keeping with workbook responses which appeared to indicate that only 35% of school councils had contacted Alberta Learning for information about school councils.

In some instances, participants indicated they knew materials, such as the Resources Guide, had been available at their schools but they were no longer able to locate them.

A number of participants indicated the materials available to them did not provide all the information they required to be productive school council members. It is suggested that, on an ongoing basis, Alberta Learning encourage school councils to identify practices which have proved useful in increasing their effectiveness. These best practices should then be distributed to councils along with other information materials.

2.3 That Alberta Learning, in partnership with school boards as well as other stakeholders, ensure there is sufficient opportunity for school council members to receive training.

School council member training should include, but not be limited to:

- understanding the roles and responsibilities of school council members
- setting goals for the school council
- developing and monitoring a business plan for the school council
- developing school council bylaws
- improving communication skills.

Availability of training surfaced as a key issue during the public forums. This finding was reflected in workbook responses which appeared to indicate 44% of school councils did not think they had enough training to be effective.

Workbook responses and the comments at the public forums indicated that continuity of membership is a concern for school councils. Councils with a high turnover in members face real challenges in ensuring their members share a common base level of knowledge and skills.

Consideration should be given to conducting school council member training programs several times a year and/or on “as-needed” basis. In addition, all school councils should be made aware of when training programs are being held.

3. **That school boards facilitate processes for ensuring school councils have meaningful input in areas in which they choose to be involved.**

This recommendation follows from recommendation #2. In addition to wanting more involvement in the areas cited in recommendation #2, many participants at the public meetings indicated they did not believe their involvement in these areas had any real impact on the decisions which were made. For example, some participants indicated that they were shown proposed school budgets, but felt the actual opportunity for input had passed.

4. **That school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts.**

Evaluations from many of the attendees at the public forums indicated they valued the opportunity to meet with members of other school councils. This interaction allowed them to discuss common concerns and share solutions to common problems.

Establishing Councils of School Councils would provide school councils within a district with the opportunity to share their best practices. It also would allow school councils to develop common positions on matters of common interest and aid in communicating those positions to their board of education. Such Councils of Councils already exist in several areas of the province. A number of school councils identified this approach as one of the “best practices” which helped make them highly effective.

5. **That school councils develop three-year plans in relation to the three-year plans for their schools and boards and that school councils review and update their plans annually.**

A number of school councils flagged having a three-year plan as one of their “best practices”. The comments of participants at the public forums and the workbook responses indicated that school councils which engage in this type of planning tend to be more effective.

Using a three-year plan would provide school councils with continuity of focus and purpose from year to year. Doing so also would alleviate some of the problems related to the turnover of members and help prevent members from pushing individual agendas. This latter issue was of concern to a number of participants at the public meetings.

As part of this recommendation, it also is suggested that school councils use staggered terms for their members. This would help ensure that the majority of council members are aware of their roles and responsibilities and the overall goals of their school councils.

Annual reviews of their three-year plan would enable school councils to more readily evaluate their effectiveness and progress.

6. **That community representatives remain a mandatory membership requirement for school councils and the School Council Regulation be changed to exclude ECS (Early Childhood Services) parents from qualifying as community representatives.**

Participant comments at the public forums, as well as the workbook responses, indicated community representatives were seen as an important component of school councils. However, recruiting a community representative poses some difficulty for many councils. As a result, some councils would choose an ECS parent as their community representative. This approach is permitted by the current School Council Regulations.

There is no doubt ECS parents are productive members of school councils. However, ECS parents are likely to bring to councils a viewpoint which is similar to that of members who have children in the school. Currently, only 25% of Albertans have children who attend primary and secondary schools. Requiring community representatives on school councils was intended to ensure the broadest possible input into the education of Alberta's children. Schools are an integral part of the communities in which they are located. What schools do or don't do has an impact on the community which goes beyond the academic achievement of their students. Therefore, there must be a true voice of the community on school councils.

- 6.1 **That school boards and school councils share the responsibility for finding an appropriate community representative.**

School boards are in a good position to identify members of the community who would be willing to be members of school councils. A council which is having difficulty recruiting a community member should be able to turn to its board for help in meeting this requirement.

7. **That Alberta Learning develop a core list of knowledge, skills and attributes principals require to work effectively with school councils and ensure appropriate learning materials and/or training programs are readily available.**

Comments from the participants at the public meetings, as well as the workbook responses, indicated school council members believe the principal is key to their success. To enable principals to play a positive role on school councils, information materials and training programs must be made readily available to them.

- 7.1 **That superintendents ensure principals have the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to assist school councils in carrying out their role.**

Superintendents are in a good position to determine if principals would benefit from training related to their role on a school council.

7.2 That a portion of principals' performance assessments be based on their activities and participation in school councils.

Because school councils believe the principal is key to their success, councils should be able to provide the superintendent with feedback related to the overall performance of the principal. This feedback should form a portion of the performance assessment and should be used to develop performance goals.

8. That Alberta Learning develop a clear definition of what constitutes core education.

During the public forums, it became apparent many school council members were unable to identify the components of core education. To be effective, school councils need a clear understanding the elements which make up core education.

8.1 That the use of school fundraising monies for core education be prohibited.

Funding of core education is the responsibility of Alberta Learning and the activities of school councils and fundraising societies should reflect that. Fundraising should be limited to areas which fall outside core funding.

Though fundraising is not an expected activity of school councils, workbook responses indicated that 74% of the councils which responded assisted in fundraising. The comments of the participants at the public forums also reflected this finding. In many instances, the same people who were school council members were also members of the school's fundraising societies. Both in the workbook and at public forums, many respondents indicated fundraising limited the ability of a school council to operate effectively because it split their focus and divided their energies.

9. That the School Council Regulation be changed to make principals and teachers ex-officio (non-voting) members of school councils.

School councils were created to enhance the input of parents and the community into the education of children and to increase the accountability of schools for educational outcomes.

During the initial stages of school council development, it was appropriate for principals and teachers to be voting members.

School councils have matured greatly and are now ready to go on to their next level of development. The advisory role of school councils and the accountability of schools will be enhanced if principals and teachers are made non-voting members of school councils. This would put principals and teachers in a position similar to that of superintendents who participate in school board meetings but who do not vote.

10. That the minister review the role and effectiveness of school councils in five years and that Alberta Learning continue to review the effectiveness of councils on an ongoing basis.

School councils are still evolving. Another review in five years will help determine if further changes are needed to increase their effectiveness. In the interim, Alberta Learning should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of school councils. Particular attention should be paid to:

- role of the principal
- effectiveness of information materials and training
- training needs of council members
- recruitment of community representatives
- recommendations implemented as a result of this report.

A Thank You to Albertans

Given the pressures of modern life, one of the most precious commodities we have is our time. The M.L.A. Working Group would, therefore, like to extend its gratitude to all the individuals who contributed their valuable time to completing workbooks and to those who attended the public forums. The Working Group could not have conducted this review without their efforts.

One of the hallmarks of Albertans is their predisposition toward doing what needs to be done and finding new and creative ways of doing so. This ability to rise to a challenge is evident in the high quality of the “best practices” submitted by school councils. The desire of these councils to freely share their successes with each other speaks to another characteristic of Albertans - their willingness to work together to achieve common goals.

The fact that thousands of people chose to become involved in the review of the effectiveness of school councils shows just how important they have become to Albertans. Therefore, it is without hesitation that we can say school councils are achieving their mandate to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta.